FROM THE BOOKSHELF: INFLUENCE, PLATFORMS, AND POWER

REVIEWERS: DENNIS LARSEN, LINQ ADVISORS; SWARAN SANDHU, HOCHSCHULE DER MEDIEN STUTTGART; STEPHEN WADDINGTON, LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

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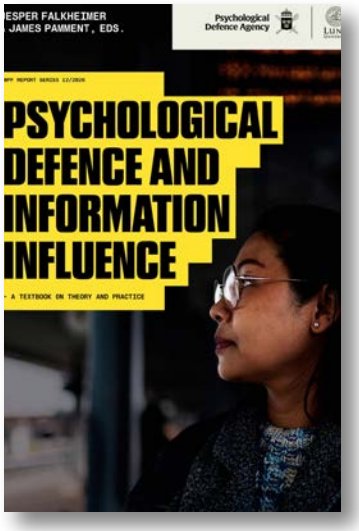
Swaran Sandhu (Hochschule der Medien Stuttgart) and editorial board members Dennis Larsen and Stephen Waddington, take a closer look at three books examining different aspects of today's information environment – from psychological defense against attempts to influence people through information to the changing dynamics of digital platforms and the hidden forces shaping public opinion. Together, the books offer distinct perspectives on how information, technology, and power shape communication.



Falkheimer, J. & Pamment, J. (2026). Psychological defence and information influence: A textbook on theory and practice. 258 pages. ISBN 978-91-989646-8-4

PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENCE AND INFORMATION INFLUENCE BY JESPER FALKHEIMER AND JAMES PAMMENT (DENNIS LARSEN)

The book argues that democratic resilience now depends as much on the ability of individuals and institutions to withstand psychological influence as on military or technological capacity. Falkheimer and Pamment gather thirty short chapters by thirty scholars and practitioners to build the first consolidated textbook on psychological defense, structured into four sections: fundamentals; the mechanics of malign information influence; case studies on China, Russia, the commercial disinformation ecosystem, election interference, the LVU campaign, the arts, and video games; and countermeasures.

Its central promise is conceptual clarity in a field where the terms “fake news,” “disinformation,” and “propaganda” are used interchangeably and unhelpfully. The editors distinguish among three distinct problem groups: mis-, dis-, and malinformation at the content level; coordinated influence operations conducted by motivated organizations; and foreign interference tied to hybrid state activity. Each requires different forms of monitoring, education, and response.

Psychological defense is framed as a shared responsibility across government, media, business, and citizens, with democracy itself to be defended only by democratic means. The editors explicitly present the book as a living document intended to become a standard reference internationally.

Most useful insights

One of the most useful insights for a corporate communication practitioner is Tsurtsumia and Pamment’s reframing of the commercial disinformation ecosystem in chapter 19. Drawing on leaked files from Russia’s Social Design Agency, the authors show that state-backed influence is now delivered through a for-profit supply chain that mimics the structure of a typical PR or marketing firm: media monitoring, content production, dissemination, and market penetration. The industry uses the vocabulary of our own profession to normalize itself.

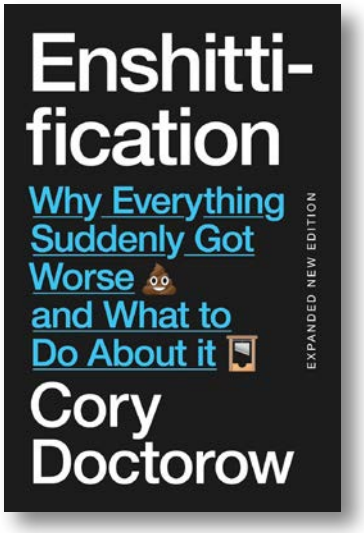
Two consequences follow for corporate communication. First, brands and their agencies are already part of this ecosystem, whether they realize it or not, through programmatic advertising infrastructure that monetizes misleading content and places client ads next to it. Second, reputational risk no longer lies solely with what a client says or does; it also lies in the media environment in which the client’s story is told and hijacked.

Who will benefit most from this book

Three audiences will benefit most. First, students and educators in strategic communication, political science, and security studies, for whom the book is explicitly designed: each chapter is short, referenced, and closes with discussion questions and suggestions for further reading.

Second, communication and public affairs practitioners in regulated or exposed sectors, particularly energy, food, healthcare, finance, logistics, and public institutions. Falkheimer’s chapter on crisis communication maps directly onto our daily work: preparedness, credibility, openness, and speed, as well as the distinction between instructing, adjusting, and reputation-focused messaging. The book gives practitioners a shared language for working with security colleagues, which is often the missing bridge in a client organization.

Third, policy and government affairs professionals working with EU policy, national resilience frameworks, or election-integrity mandates. The chapters on definitions, attribution, deterrence, and the ethics of counter-disinformation provide the conceptual scaffolding that policy conversations currently lack.



Doctorow, C. (2025).
Enshittification: Why everything suddenly got worse and what do do about it. 352 pages. ISBN 978-1836743750.

ENSHITTIFICATION: WHY EVERYTHING SUDDENLY GOT WORSE AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT BY CORY DOCTOROW (SWARAN SANDHU)

We've all experienced it: you're excited about a new digital platform, tool, or service and sign up for it. At first, you have a great time, but then the user experience gradually deteriorates as the platform's price goes up. Users have to navigate through banners and special offers, complete a two-factor authentication, download an extra app for that, install regular updates – all to find out that the app has been discontinued. In short, the mental load associated with using an app or platform increases while the services get worse and the costs rise. Cory Doctorow calls this process "enshittification", and I shit you not, he's right!

Doctorow has a background as a science fiction author – which is how I first came across his work – and as a digital activist (he was the former European Director of the Electronic Frontier Foundation), and the book is a clear call to arms. But first, what is enshittification all about? In the long run, most digital platforms follow the same life cycle: at the start, their services seem useful, their interfaces simple, and their prices low or nonexistent. As the platform gains users, lock-in effects take hold, switching costs rise, and the platform begins to prioritize profit maximization, especially once it goes public and needs to demonstrate increased usage every quarter.

This topic is especially timely in the current discussions of digital and data sovereignty from geopolitical and organizational perspectives. The book echoes the Electronic Frontier Foundation's broader critique of data and surveillance capitalism, encapsulated in the phrase "you are not a product": users' personal data and attention should not be treated merely as commodities to be extracted and monetized.

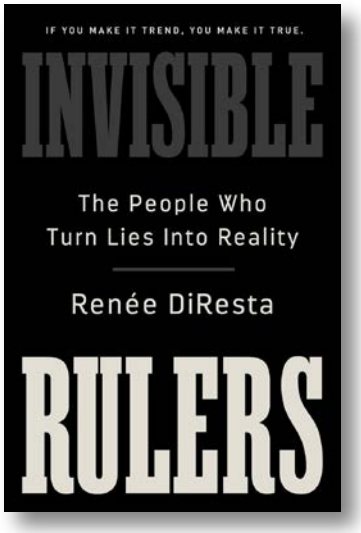
Most useful insights

The most striking takeaway is that platform degradation is a deliberate choice rather than an accident or the result of incompetence. From my perspective as someone who teaches and researches strategic communication, this serves as a wake-up call. By using platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, or LinkedIn in a business context, we surrender to the platforms' algorithmic regimes. Their owners can change the rules and services at any time – just ask whether you or your organization still uses Twitter. Seriously, has anyone ever read the 50-plus pages of legalese we must agree to before using a platform, apart from perhaps someone in the legal department? But the pressure to follow our peers and reach our target audiences is too strong, so we surrender. Basically, we and our organizations become the product by investing our time and resources in these platforms. We must stop treating these one-sided dependencies as stable arenas for relationship building, as many communication strategies imply. Instead, they are toxic relationships in which our audiences, too, become the product. They, and we, deserve better.

Instead, enshittification forces us to take stock and refocus on resilient, owned communication channels, and digital sovereignty to protect authentic stakeholder trust – and our own credibility. Currently, we are at the prime of the AI hype and look at what has happened: OpenAI's once-free ChatGPT service now displays advertisements, while users have to pay for a premium subscription without ads. There is no free lunch in this game. Nevertheless, Doctorow offers some grounds for hope, including the interoperability requirements under the EU's Digital Services Act, which is intended to curb platform monopolies.

Who will benefit most from this book

Communication leaders, strategists, and students will benefit immensely from the book, although some of the prime examples such as Facebook and Twitter might come across as tales from a bygone era to students. We can all decide for ourselves which platforms we want to use – and yes, life without Instagram or WhatsApp is possible. I use neither, so I am predisposed to agree with Doctorow's claims. Some of my students are actively opting out because they recognize the negative effects of these platforms. So, let's ask ourselves: Do we need to play the expected game, or are there alternatives in strategic communication? And can choosing not to use a platform in itself be a powerful statement?



DiResta, R. (2024).
Invisible Rulers The people who turn lies into reality. 448 pages. pages.
ISBN 978-1541703377

INVISIBLE RULERS: THE PEOPLE WHO TURN LIES INTO REALITY BY RENÉE DIRESTA (STEPHEN WADDINGTON)

"Invisible rulers" is a phrase used by Edward Bernays in his 1928 book *Propaganda* to describe a small elite with access to the media that can frame public opinion. Renée DiResta updates the concept, arguing that almost 100 years later it has passed to algorithms, influencers, and online crowds.

So-called influencers are the new elites who use algorithms to reach an audience. Engagement is driven by crowds sharing and remixing. Together they decide what gets attention and what people accept as true.

DiResta describes this as a collision between the rumor mill and the propaganda machine. Social media combines the two, enabling anyone to promote and package a rumor that is amplified at the scale and speed of mass media. As DiResta puts it, if you make it trend, you make it true.

The result is that we all have a different media reality. Algorithms create a bespoke reality based on who we follow and content that we have previously consumed. Consensus becomes harder to reach because everyone is working from a different set of facts.

The book sets out how different realities are manufactured and what happens to organizations when rumors travel faster than they can respond. It shows that while the technology is new, the techniques would be recognizable to Bernays.

Most useful insights

The most useful insight is that trust must be built before it is needed. DiResta's advice is for organizations to be present in online communities before a crisis, to work with trusted intermediaries, and to pre-bunk rumors before they spread rather than rebut them after the event.

The context for this is deeply troubling and uncomfortable. Almost all the case studies in the book describe how so-called invisible rulers create organizational or societal harm. This includes reputational damage, health misinformation, and manipulation of the political process.

An organization can no longer rely on being able to control a message to its publics even via its own media. Rumors take hold on social media and have no respect for organizational counter-narratives. Reputation is contested across many separate realities at once.

Organizations lose out because they communicate slowly and formally. They typically aren't part of online communities. Their silence is filled by an alternative narrative. That makes listening, relationships, and speed of response management issues rather than tactical ones. It is a strong argument for public relations as a strategic management function.

Who will benefit most from this book

I recommend the book to any researcher who wants to land their work with a mainstream audience. DiResta, an associate research professor at Georgetown University, received the 2024 Carl Sagan Prize for Science Popularization for her work translating research on online propaganda for the public. She frames complex research in an accessible way. It is a model for those of us trying to translate our work from theory to practice.

Anyone working in communications who wants to understand the modern media ecosystem should also read the book. It contains a clear description of the environment in which they operate that will be useful in explaining media risk to boards.

DiResta writes from experience. Her work tracking misinformation at the Stanford Internet Observatory made her the target of congressional scrutiny, legal action, and online smears. She has lived the issues that she describes.

The book is a challenging read and has limitations. It is US-centric and the case studies rely heavily on political and public health stories. The analysis is also stronger than the solutions. DiResta's calls for changes to platform design, regulation, and education are sensible, but they feel weak against the scale of the problem she describes. None of that detracts from its value as one of the clearest accounts I have read of how public opinion is now formed via the modern media ecosystem.

REVIEWERS



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